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# The Coming Debate on SALT

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WASHINGTON—"Within a few weeks we will have a SALT agreement that will be the pride of the country."

President Carter made that prediction in October 1977. More than a year later, the U.S. and the Soviet Union are still trying to reach that new strategic arms limitation treaty. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko plan to meet soon, perhaps next week, in an effort to resolve remaining issues. If they succeed, President Carter and Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, could sign a treaty—the culmination of six years of negotiations—at a summit early next year.

Obviously, Mr. Carter turned out to be a poor judge of the time necessary to conclude a new agreement. His assertion that the nuclear arms control pact will be "the pride of the country" may turn out to be overly optimistic as well.

A SALT agreement would be a diplomatic accomplishment on arms control, and polls show there is public support for such a treaty. But any treaty, regardless of its terms, will trigger a Senate ratification fight and a broad political debate that is likely to convince many Americans that the U.S. has failed to keep pace with expanding Soviet military might.

Even if an arms control pact is ratified—and that is far from certain, though the administration thinks it would be after a long and acrimonious battle—the debate is likely to leave many people feeling less secure about U.S. strength, more suspicious of Soviet intentions and, therefore, more willing to increase U.S. defense spending.

## U.S.-Soviet Military Balance

"I don't believe it possible to consider the SALT II treaty in isolation from the general deterioration which has taken place in the overall military balance between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the last decade," contends Senator Sam Nunn. The decision of the Georgia Democrat, an influential defense expert, on whether or not to support the treaty will be one key to its ratification.

The tip in the U.S.-Soviet military balance is beyond question, although officials disagree over the extent of the Soviet gain. Defense Secretary Harold Brown says: "The Soviets have been engaged in a substantial military buildup for nearly 20 years." The Central Intelligence Agency reports that from 1967 to 1977, Soviet defense spending grew 4% to 5% a year in real, uninflated dollar terms, while U.S. spending declined in real terms, after adjusting for day-to-day costs of the Vietnam war. Currently the Soviet Union is spending about $150 billion a year on defense, some $30 billion more than the U.S.

As a result, the Soviets have shown a consistent, well-planned expansion of military capabilities in nearly every area. Considering that the U.S. held clear military superiority 10, and even five years ago, the Soviet improvement has been dramatic. Administration officials assert, the U.S. still retains an overall military advantage.

U.S. admirals talk openly of the possibility of losing their "slim margin" of naval superiority to the Soviets in the 1980s. European allies question the West's ability to repel a Soviet attack on Europe. And Pentagon planners worry increasingly about the Soviet's growing ability to airlift and sealift forces quickly over long distances. Until recently, only the U.S. possessed this ability to project power.

The growth of Soviet strategic forces—those designed to fight a nuclear war—has been particularly ominous. Much of the improvement has taken place since 1972, when the U.S. and the Soviet Union signed the first strategic arms control agreement. That agreement limited the numbers of missiles each country could deploy, but it didn't restrict measures to make the weapons more devastating, either by improvements in accuracy or increases in the number of warheads each missile could carry.

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Both sides have improved their forces under SALT I—the number of U.S. strategic nuclear warheads has grown to about 9,000 from 6,000 in 1972, while Soviet warheads have increased to 4,000 from 2,200 over the same period. But, overall, the Soviet gains have been more striking.

Under SALT I, for instance, the Soviet Union has deployed three new land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, each larger than the best U.S. ICBM, the Minuteman 3. The U.S. could have replaced existing missiles with new models. Instead, it chose to improve the Minuteman missile and won't replace it with a new missile until the mid-'80s.

As a result of Soviet advances, President Carter and Mr. Brown concede that within five years the Soviets will possess an ICBM force accurate and powerful enough to threaten the security of the U.S. land based missile force. Then, for the first time, the U.S. will live with the knowledge that one leg of its strategic triad of land based missiles, submarine-launched missiles and long-range bombers is theoretically vulnerable to a crippling first strike.

U.S. officials can't fully explain the reasons for the Soviet's huge and continuing military investment. "We suspect that the main thrust of the Soviet Union is toward expanding its political influence and establishing itself as a global power," Secretary Brown says. But "the Soviets may be less well-intentioned than we would wish them to be."

Others are less diplomatic. "The size, sophistication and rate of growth of Soviet military power far exceeds Soviet requirements for defense," says the Committee on the Present Danger, an influential private group that believes the U.S. is losing its military advantage. "The Soviet military buildup reflects the offensive nature of the Soviet political and military challenge and the Soviet belief that the use of force remains a viable instrument of foreign policy," the committee contends.

Driven by their concern that the Soviet military is catching up to the U.S., many Senators will demand a step-up in U.S. defense programs as the price for supporting the new SALT treaty. It's already clear that ratification will depend more on what new weapons the administration promises to build during the life of the new arms control treaty than on the new force limits the treaty will impose.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff and many in Congress want a new long-range bomber to replace the proposed B1 plane that President Carter canceled. Many Senators plan to demand as the price of SALT an administration promise to move forward quickly with a new ICBM deployed in a way that will be less vulnerable to Soviet attack.

## Increase in Defense Spending

President Carter long ago abandoned his election campaign rhetoric of cutting defense spending. Now he is favoring defense outlays over other programs. Despite his anti-inflation program he is committed to a real increase in defense spending. The only question is whether he'll stick to the 3% increase he has promised our allies or settle for a smaller increase to help hold down the federal deficit.

If the administration must spend more on defense to win ratification of a new arms control agreement—and the Soviets continue their military buildup—is SALT worth the effort?

The administration thinks so. Officials argue that SALT II, unlike SALT I, will start to limit technological improvements in nuclear weaponry, while placing a slightly lower ceiling on force levels. SALT advocates say this will represent a modest but important step toward limiting the scope of the arms race, while laying the foundation for improvements in U.S.-Soviet relations.

"When necessary, we will maintain our security and protect our interests by strengthening our military capabilities," President Carter says. But "our security, and the security of all nations, can be better served through equitable and verifiable limits on arms than through unbridled competition."

Those are sound reasons for supporting the emerging agreement. But the lesson from SALT I is clear. Strategic arms control doesn't stop the arms race. It merely allows it to continue under slightly differ-

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